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THE CONDITION OF FARM WORKERS AND SMALL FARMERS IN 1966.
REPORT TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS
FUND.

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NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND, NEW YORK, N.Y.

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THERE ARE SEVERAL FACETS TO THE PROBLEMS FACING FARM
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AND LOAN ASSISTANCE, AND MARKETING COOPERATIVES, ARE CITED AS
SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS TO HELP THE SMALL FARMER AND HALT THE
EXODUS FROM THE LAND. (SF)

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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REPORT TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND
by Fay Bennett, Executive Secretary

"Some of the [Mississippi] children could not go to school because they had no shoes, and had distended stomachs, chronic sores of the upper lip, and were extremely lethargic - all of which are the tragic evidence of serious malnutrition."

Senate Subcommittee on Employment,
Manpower and Poverty, New York Times, 4/30/67

"It was a simple business proposition [leasing 4,600 acres to the Hammermill Paper Company], Mr. Rogers explained. The rent for putting the land into pulpwood would far exceed the return from the 25 or so [evicted] tenant families"

Sumter County, Alabama, landowner in
the New York Times, 2/11/67

"My mother . . . has been working in the fields for 40 years She just came back from Minnesota. Why should she have to do that? My father has cancer, yet he is working in the field. Forty years of migrating to look for food is too long."

Father Gonzales, co-chairman of the
Texas farm workers protest march

The Year in Brief

1966 was the year in which the United States discovered it still needed its farmers. Large-scale world food shortages resulted in the reduction of U.S. carry-over stocks from surplus to less than desirable levels. Cotton shortages also appeared abroad; these may affect U.S. surpluses in 1967 as the grain shortage has changed the food picture already. General farm income rose, but consumer costs rose so much more that widespread consumer protest was felt. Although farm wages increased too, and a minimum wage was established, they lagged so far behind general American standards that farm workers across the country undertook protest marches, union organization, and strikes, with first dramatic gains appearing in California. None of these gains was shared by small farmers, whose numbers continued to drop, particularly under forced evictions in the southern states.

The Vanishing Sharecropper

Since 1960, the total number of farm residents in the United States has dropped by 4 million, from 15.6 to 11.6 million people. The rate of decline is about 4 per cent for white and 10 per cent for Negro farm people. In eight southern states the number of Negro farmers - owners, part-owners, and tenants - dropped from 210,591 in the agricultural census of 1959 to 142,506 in the 1964 census. This was a loss of 32.4 per cent. In the same states the number of white farmers dropped 15 per cent in the same period, from 679,692 to 576,394. The exodus of rural Negroes in the sixties can be related directly to the number of mechanical cotton pickers. Alabama had 734 in 1960; 2,490 in 1964. South Carolina had 455 in 1960; 2,048 in 1964. Figures are similar in other states. Mechanization and use of chemicals have started the same process in tobacco production.

The out-migration is related, also, to the persistent difficulty marginal farmers - those who need help most - have in obtaining government assistance. Only 12 per cent of Farmers Home Administration loans in 1966 went to farmers who earned less than \$4,000 - and most Negro farmers earn far less. In Hinds County, Mississippi, evictions are related directly to the tenant farmers' attempts to share in federal programs; to their asking for receipts in business dealings; to the election of Negro members of Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service committees. Tenant farmers were evicted in Alabama because they would not sign over their ASCS checks to the plantation owners.

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Poverty in the South

Most of all, people leave to escape the poverty that is still more prevalent in the South than anywhere else in the nation. The southern states had only 25.9 per cent of the nation's population in the 1960 census, but nearly half its poverty. Yet their share in the federal programs that might relieve that poverty is near the population proportion, and far below the extent of need. For instance, only 31.8 per cent of public assistance payments in the United States in fiscal 1965 were made in the South.

The antipoverty program itself has been urban-oriented, but the rural roots of poverty are beginning to be understood. In fiscal 1966, less than one-seventh of total Community Action Program funds went into rural program development and administration. In Department of Labor programs, only 20 per cent of Manpower Development and Training Act funds went for projects in rural areas. In 1964, the Rural Community Development Service found that only 3.4 per cent of MDTA training projects were conducted in small towns under 10,000 population or their surrounding rural areas, and only 3.1 per cent of the number of trainees who participated were in rural and small-town projects. In fiscal 1966, 164 MDTA agricultural projects were approved for 7,100 trainees, a decrease from previous years. The total budget for the South's 16 Negro agricultural colleges was \$32 million in 1962 while that for 4 southern white land-grant colleges, with fewer students, was \$72 million.

Hired Farm Workers

More than 3 million persons did some work on farms for cash wages in 1965, the latest year for which full information is available. Of these, about 1.3 million were casual workers, employed for less than 25 days at farm work, and about 1.9 million were noncasual, employed for more than 25 days. In the labor intensive crops, the number of man hours increased - 2 per cent in both the record vegetable crop and in fruit and nut production.

Income. The 1.3 million casual workers averaged only 9 days of work and earned \$66.00; although many of them were students and housewives, there is no way of knowing how many were trying to find work over the whole harvest season, and how much their incomes depended on farm work. Over-all, the 1.9 million noncasual workers averaged 137 days and earned \$1,045 during the year. Whites averaged 142 days and earned \$1,170; nonwhites averaged 125 days and earned \$747. About 2 million persons did farm work only; they averaged 104 days' work and earned \$805. In 1964, 2.1 million did farm work only; they averaged 100 days' work, and earned \$698. A Department of Labor study submitted to Congress in January, 1966, revealed that although in 1947 the median annual income of farm laborers including foremen was 31 per cent of that for craftsmen, foremen, and similar workers in nonfarm industries, in 1964 it had dropped to 21 per cent. In the same period, average hourly earnings in contract construction increased 131 per cent; in retail trade, 108 per cent; in manufacturing, 107 per cent; in wholesale trade, 107 per cent; and in agriculture, only 64 per cent. Yet output per man hour in agriculture in 1964 was 2.7 times higher than in 1947, while in nonfarm industries it was 1.6 times as great.

Foreign Workers. The transition towards the elimination of foreign workers in favor of domestic farm workers continued but had not yet been fully completed. More than 500,000 man months of bracero (Mexican contract) labor were used in 1964; 27,000 in 1965; and about half of that in 1966. Three-fourths of the foreign workers in 1966 were British West Indians; two-thirds of them worked in Florida sugar cane; most of the rest picked apples further north. Employment of Canadians, mainly in northern potatoes and some in apples, declined 30 per cent to about 3,600 man months. The last Japanese contract worker left the country in September, 1966.

The Wall Street Journal for March 9, 1967, reported:

The bracero cut-off clearly has accomplished one thing, however: Improving the lot of the farm workers who remain. According to Labor Department statistics, California's hourly farm wage rate climbed 2 cents from October 1964 to \$1.58 in October 1966 as growers competed to attract workers

While this was going on, the vast majority of the growers were hardly displaying the deep suffering they had so dismally predicted. From \$2.67 billion in 1964, California's gross farm income climbed to \$3.5 billion in 1965 and \$3.95 billion in 1966. More importantly, net income, which dipped to \$922 million in 1965 from \$1.05 billion in 1964, rebounded to some \$1 billion last year.

Housing. One of the greatest barriers to securing an adequate supply of domestic farm workers has been the lack of family housing. An eight-county survey made in California farm country showed that 80 per cent of the farm worker housing violated minimum standards of health, safety, and sanitation; 65 per cent of the housing was deteriorated and unsuitable; 33 per cent had inadequate sanitation facilities; 25 per cent had no bathing

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Children. One result of migrant parents' substandard wages is that children are pressed into working to increase the family income. The present child labor provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act provide a 16-year minimum age limitation during school hours for the school district where the minor lives while employed, and no minimum age is set for

work outside school hours. Minors employed by their parents are also excluded. Even with this inadequate legal protection for children, violations are constantly found by the investigators of the Department of Labor. In fiscal year 1966, 1,725 farms were found in violation, and 5,487 children were discovered working during school hours; more than half of these youngsters were between the ages of 10 and 13. It is estimated that approximately 375,000 children between the ages of 10 and 13 work in the fields.

Health. Farm workers lose more days due to sickness (an average $7\frac{1}{2}$ days a year) than workers in all other occupations (average 6 days). More than 2 out of 10 farm workers have chronic health conditions that limit their activities, compared to about 1 out of 10 for all occupations. The Journal of Occupational Medicine for January, 1966, reports:

Experience indicates that migrants generally have no greater incidence of venereal diseases and tuberculosis than other similar low-income nonmigratory residents. The migrant family does suffer, however, from diseases such as diarrhea, respiratory infections (including pneumonia), skin diseases, frequent pregnancies and complications of pregnancies, muscular aches and pains, and accidents and trauma. In past years, most communities have been able to provide little if any treatment for these conditions.

A survey taken by VISTA volunteers in Orange County, New York, in the fall of 1965, verified this situation in New York State, which has more facilities and less restrictive residence requirements than most states. Out of 258 farm worker family members, only 18.5 per cent had been immunized or inoculated for diphtheria, 20.3 per cent for tetanus, and 37.9 per cent for small pox; 13.9 per cent had recently had a tuberculin skin test, 44.4 per cent had had chest X-rays, and 21.4 per cent, a blood test.

Accidents. In the 20 states that reported injuries to farm workers during 1964, 1,400 involved children under 18 employed in agriculture. In 1965, agriculture again ranked as the third most hazardous industry, following mining and construction, according to the National Safety Council report, Accident Facts, 1966. There were 3,000 accidental deaths and 260,000 disabling injuries. Only 9 states and Puerto Rico provide workmen's compensation insurance for farm workers in the same manner as for other workers. Eight states provide coverage for specific agricultural occupations, usually the use and operation of machinery. A recent survey showed that only 42 per cent of all farm workers had hospital insurance and only 37 per cent had surgical insurance.

Legislation. In 1966, some 390,000 hired farm workers were included under the federal minimum wage law, although their hourly wage starts at only \$1.00, an obvious poverty rate. But they are not yet covered by unemployment insurance, nor is their right to bargain collectively protected by law. Efforts to include farm workers' children under the protections given other children by the Fair Labor Standards Act have fallen short for many years. The major campaign at this time, spurred by organizing drives across the country, is to bring farm workers under coverage of the National Labor Relations Act.

Organization of Farm Workers

Most hopeful trend of the year was the upsurge in unionization of farm workers. Two major California farm worker unions merged into the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO. Although UFWOC has gained contracts with both Schenley Industries and the DiGiorgio Corporation, the strike goes on against about thirty other grape producers, and organization has yet to be extended to other branches of California agriculture. Outside California, the most important current organizing effort is at La Casita farms in Texas. A dramatic feature of organizing efforts has been the marches on state capitals to ask for a minimum wage and other farm worker needs. Such marches have been held in California, Texas, Wisconsin, and Michigan, and have attracted wide community support. Union efforts have not been confined to these areas. They have been felt up and down the East Coast, particularly in Florida. Sugar workers are organizing in Louisiana.

Federal Programs

Farmers Home Administration. Total rural housing loans in 1960 amounted to about \$40 million; in fiscal year 1966, loans for rural housing, farm labor housing, and rural senior citizens' housing had risen to more than \$266 million. Farm ownership and operating loans

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Farmers Home Administration. Total rural housing loans in 1960 amounted to about \$40 million; in fiscal year 1966, loans for rural housing, farm labor housing, and rural senior citizens' housing had risen to more than \$266 million. Farm ownership and operating loans went from \$43 million in 1960 to more than \$233 million in fiscal 1966.

The latest in yearly FHA surveys of farm ownership borrowers shows that on the average, over a five-year period, they raised their gross cash income from \$9,383 to \$17,410 and made substantial gains in net worth. While this is an important indication of how much farmers need low-cost credit and how well they benefit from it, the very average indicates that the loan program is not reaching low-income farmers. Operating loans were at \$276 million in 1965, about the same as 1962 but about \$25 million less than during the 3 intervening years. Yet low-income farmers went without needed credit.

Economic Opportunity Loans through FHA have begun to reach farmers who were too poor to be serviced by FHA previously. Seventeen thousand rural families were aided in fiscal 1966. There were 28,011 individual loans totaling \$48 million, and cooperatives serving

low-income rural people received 473 loans totaling \$5.6 million, all since January, 1965. The average gross income of those who borrowed to finance nonagricultural enterprises increased from \$3,112 to \$5,862; for agricultural purposes, from \$2,505 to \$3,436.

Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service. In Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee, only two Negro farmers (in Georgia) won seats on the county committees in 1966 ASCS elections, and these were as second alternates. In the same states, 302 Negro farmers have been elected to the community committees but only 68 as chairman, vice chairman, or regular member. The rest were alternates. The gain over 1965 is 28 community committeemen.

Food Stamps and Surplus Food. The Food Stamp Act of 1964 seemed a promising plan because the food stamps could be used at the grocery store for a more varied diet than was available through the surplus food program. But it was a substitute for, not in addition to, surplus food. The stamps must first be bought and the Act did not take into account the fact that the poorest people - like sharecroppers and tenants - don't have cash. In Madison County, Mississippi, 11,244 families participated in the surplus food program but when the changeover was made only 5,951 participated in the food stamp program. In Harrison County the number dropped from 9,500 families to 2,201, and the situation is duplicated throughout the South. Under current regulations in Alabama, a family of 4 with an income of only \$45 a month must pay \$18 to receive \$56 worth of food stamps; a family of 4 with no income must pay \$8 a month to receive \$48 worth of food stamps. The Secretary of Agriculture has legal power to distribute free surplus foods during "emergency" situations, even in communities which have food stamp programs. He could also develop realistic payment scales so that food stamps could be free for those without money. NSF and the newly organized Commission on Rural Affairs of the Citizens' Crusade Against Poverty are pressing for such action.

A Program for Rural America

If present trends continue, the next quarter of a century will see 100 million more people crowded into the great urban centers where already 7 out of every 10 people live. The mounting crisis of noise, dirt, and smog; poverty and illiteracy and despair; racism and tension and violence, will convulse the nation.

This need not be. Pilot projects in which the National Sharecroppers Fund has played a part have already demonstrated that poverty can be attacked successfully in the rural areas and the forced exodus from the land can be halted. Manpower training programs combined with crop diversification and loan assistance have enabled poor farmers to raise their incomes 100 per cent. Marketing co-operatives such as the West Batesville Farmers Association (Miss.) and the MidSouth Oil Cooperative (Tenn.) are saving small farmers money and helping them to increase their incomes. Farmers in South Carolina, Georgia, and other states are building low-cost homes.

But pilot projects are not enough. All rural people need literacy and skill training. Massive economic and technical assistance is needed if hundreds of thousands are to stay rather than migrate. Discrimination, repeatedly protested by NSF, against Negro farmers - and indeed against all small farmers - must end.

And because rural communities and areas have been impoverished along with their people, public investment is needed to build the roads, schools, hospitals, and other public facilities they need in order to attract new industries and institutions. From a quarter to a half million new jobs could be created to meet these basic rural needs. This new tax base, and increased purchasing power, could begin to break the cycle of poverty and start the spiral towards abundance.

National Sharecroppers Fund

*works in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee, helping poverty-stricken people learn how to help themselves;

*cooperates with other concerned organizations, particularly with the Southern Regional Council and its state councils on human relations in the field, and with the Citizens' Crusade Against Poverty in Washington;

*works to end the exclusion of agricultural workers from the protections and benefits of social legislation that other workers enjoy;

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*supports the efforts of farm workers in organizing unions, and guides low-income farmers in organizing cooperatives;

*carries on extensive educational work through: publishing and widely distributing printed materials; presenting testimony before governmental agencies; supplying speakers and informational services for a great variety of public groups; maintaining contacts with the press and other media;

*works with government and private agencies to help low-income rural people build a better life.

National Sharecroppers Fund - 112 East 19th Street, New York, New York 10003